

Conference briefings

The risks of motherhood*

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The Marcé Society, a multidisciplinary group set up in 1980 to advance the understanding, prevention and treatment of post-partum mental illness, met in York for its biennial meeting last September to celebrate its tenth birthday. In the middle of the 19th century, Louis Marcé first drew attention to the special nature of psychiatric illness in the puerperium. Since then, as opening speaker, Dr Channi Kumar pointed out, although maternal morbidity has dropped dramatically, in particular over the last 40 years with improvements in obstetric care together with social, cultural and educational changes, psychiatric morbidity in the puerperium remains as prevalent as it was 100 years ago.

Currently a prospective study of pregnant women with a past history of puerperal psychosis and so at high risk of a further episode is in progress at the Maudsley Hospital. Among this high risk group it seems that the mothers who relapsed with a neurotic disorder were twice as likely to have experienced an adverse life event in the preceding 12 months, while women who had only recently been discharged from in-patient psychiatric care were at increased risk of a psychotic relapse in the puerperium. Significant factors in the partners which predicted relapse in the women were poor social adjustment and low communication. Biological factors in the mother may also be predictive: in the at risk group there was an enhanced apomorphine induced growth hormone response, which might suggest, for example, hypersensitivity of hypothalamic D2 receptors.

Controversy continues over whether or not depression is more prevalent in post-partum women

compared with matched controls, with conflicting results being presented at the meeting. In London, Dr Louis Appleby has found a surprisingly low rate of suicide among women in the puerperium. Is childbirth in some way protective to the newly delivered mother? However, as Lynn Murray reported, concern rightly persists about the effects of maternal depression on child development, with her demonstration of a possible specific cognitive effect and disruption of attachment to the mother at 18 months.

Lively discussions centred around how to prevent a second episode of post-partum illness in high risk women. Two recent studies indicated success with the use of lithium, which is perhaps hardly surprising given the affective nature of the majority of puerperal illnesses. Dr Katharina Dalton presented data from a large series of women in whom the relapse rate of post-natal depression was reduced from 40 to 10% by prophylactic use of progesterone. Meanwhile, other groups are investigating the prophylactic effectiveness of oestrogen.

Not only are mothers at high risk of psychiatric disorder in the immediate post-partum period, but as Dr Richard Gater and colleagues reported, it also seems that parous women remain at increased risk of affective psychosis compared with men and nulliparous women at least until the age of 50, and possibly for the rest of their lives. Dr Gater went on to suggest that the female excess of affective morbidity can perhaps be entirely explained by the increased rate in parous women. This was an intriguing finding for delegates – mothers and non-mothers – to mull over as they were entertained on the last evening of the conference in the Merchant Adventurers' Hall in York, where the Marcé Society had arranged its tenth birthday dinner.

*Biennial meeting of the Marcé Society held in York from 4–7 September 1990.